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CARIBBEAN INFLUENCE
ON THE
PREHISTORIC CERAMIC ART
OF THE
SOUTHERN STATES

By W. H. HOLMES



FROM THE AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGIST

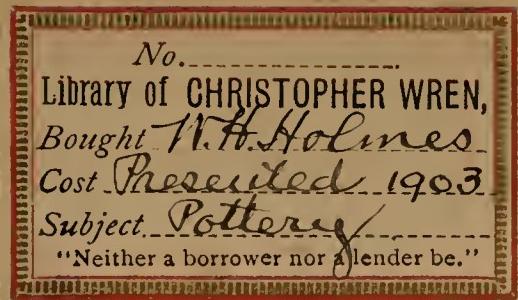
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BY W. H. HOLMES.

Prominent among the problems that attract the attention of students of native American history is that of the origin and geographic mutations of the races or groups of men. Arts, institutions, and physical characters, ancient and modern, are studied with exhaustive care that comparisons may be instituted between the peoples of all lands, near and remote. Every gateway of ingress to the continent, every point of contact or approach of independent habitable areas, is examined and reexamined with the view of detecting traces of movements of men and art. Slowly yet surely our knowledge is accumulating and correct notions and sound general interpretations are prevailing, even though final determinations may not in many cases be within our reach.

Observing the geographic relations of the West Indies to the continents of North and South America, ethnologists have speculated as to the nature and extent of prehistoric intercourse between the peoples of the contiguous shores. The Arawak and Carib have been followed back and forth from the Antilles to the southern mainland, and evidences of Caribbean* occupation or influence have been diligently sought in Florida and along the Gulf coast. Cuba and the Bahamas are within easy reach of the mainland of Florida and intercourse must have been common, but up to the present time little definite information has been obtained with respect to it. Recent researches have led me to examine with great care the art remains of the southeastern United States, and some interesting facts have been developed which may possibly serve to assist in linking the mainland with the Caribbean islands by art at least, if not by race. For years I have noticed certain marked differences between the ceramic products of the Florida-Georgia region and like works

*The term Caribbean, as used in this paper, refers to the culture province, and not to a particular stock of people.

found in the body of the country to the north and west, and have published some facts relating to the subject in earlier numbers of *THE ANTHROPOLOGIST*. In finishing and decorating their earthenware the ancient potters of this province employed stamps or paddle-like modeling tools, the faces of which were engraved with various designs, some simple and conventional, the imprints on clay resembling closely the reticulated effect produced by applying the mesh of a coarse, open fabric; others quite elaborate, embracing figures more or less complex and often elegant, embodying curved lines in many unique combinations.



FIG. 1.—Design of Caribbean type from a vase found in a mound in Franklin county, Florida.

The impressions left on the vases are so partial and confused from the use of the flat stamps over and over again on the convex surfaces of the utensil that long and careful study was necessary for their full analysis. Finally, a number of complete or nearly complete designs were restored, some of which have been published.* An excellent example of these pottery-stamp designs recently obtained is presented in Fig. 1. The stamp was

* W. H. Holmes: *THE ANTHROPOLOGIST*, January, 1892.

used in decorating a narrow collar encircling the neck of a globular vase from a mound in Franklin county, Florida. The impressions made were only partial on account of the flatness of the tool and the convexity of the plastic surface. However, nearly all parts of the design had at one point or another come in contact with the clay, and by combining the numerous partial impressions left, the entire figure was made out. The design proper is represented in the cut by the white lines, the inter-spaces being black; it is thoroughly characteristic of the South Appalachian ceramic group, although rather more complete and satisfactory than most of the others so far restored. Observing



FIG. 2.—Design carved across the seat of a wooden stool, Turk's island.

the dissimilarity of these figures to the ornamental designs of the surrounding areas in the United States, the idea was suggested of comparing them with the decorative conceptions of the West Indies.

It happens that our museums are not well supplied with art remains from the islands contiguous to Florida; but the collections of Guesde in Guadeloupe island, Lesser Antilles; Latimer in Porto Rico, and Gabb on Turk's island, Bahama group, furnish numerous examples of articles decorated in what is thought to be the Carib style, and afford the desired opportunity for instituting comparisons. In the Smithsonian Report

for 1884 Prof. O. T. Mason published illustrations of designs engraved on a remarkable wooden stool or chair obtained by Mr. Gabb from a cave on Turk's island, and two of his figures are reproduced here in Figs. 2 and 3. Neither of these figures exactly duplicates any of the Florida-Georgia designs, but comparison makes it clear that analogies in features of motive,

grouping, and execution are remarkably close—too close certainly to have arisen save through identity or most intimate relationship, socially or sanguinously, of the peoples employing them. Another figure, also from a Turk's island stool, and shown in Fig. 4, embodies motives absolutely identical with those in the Florida specimen, Fig. 1, as will be seen at a glance. Such minor differences as do exist

FIG. 3.—Design decorating face of a figure forming end of a Turk's island stool.

have resulted from the necessity of filling up spaces of different shape.



FIG. 4.—Design from the seat of a wooden stool, Turk's island.

The most striking characteristics of the West Indian decorative designs are complicated groupings of curved and broken lines and the filling in of areas and interspaces with concentric circles and angular figures. There are also peculiarities of

arrangement of component parts of complex figures which suggest the influence of the conventional treatment of life forms so common in the art of the Antilles and the south shores of the Caribbean sea. The conclusion reached, after long study, that the resemblances of these figures to the Appalache-Florida work are too pronounced in character to be fortuitous is confirmed by the additional observation that the Turk's Island examples presented in Figs. 2, 3, and 4 are engraved or carved in wood precisely as were the paddle-stamp designs used by the potters of the mainland and precisely as are the less attractive decorations of the Cherokee potter of today. This confirmation is



FIG. 5.—Sketch map showing the extent of supposed Caribbean influence on ceramic decoration in the southern states.

further strengthened by a study of the distribution of the supposed Caribbean features of Appalache-Florida art. These features prevail most fully and exhibit greatest individuality in those parts of Florida and Georgia most convenient to the Antilles, and followed inland they are found to gradually disappear in a broad field, furnishing decorative conceptions and treatment of totally distinct types. This distribution is indicated in the small sketch map presented in Fig. 5. The most northern traces of distinctive Caribbean treatment and motive are found

in the valley of the Yadkin in North Carolina, near the Virginia line, and in the valley of the Tennessee near Knoxville; and the most western occur on the Gulf coast in southeast Alabama.

There is reason to believe, then, that the influence of Caribbean ideas was strongly felt in the ceramic art of the mainland, and the question arises as to the nature of the agencies by which this result could have been brought about. Did the Caribbean peoples moving to the north and west reach the mainland and occupy part or all of the vast area indicated, or did they originally occupy this province, passing, under the pressure of encroaching peoples, or through some impulse of migration, across the narrow stretch of sea to occupy the great groups of Caribbean islands? Or, rather, shall we surmise that their presence on the mainland was casual and occasional as in the friendly visiting back and forth of neighboring peoples or in the landing of expeditions for pillage and conquest, and that certain elements of their art were thus absorbed by the more primitive tribes of the continent?

It is well known that arts or features of art do migrate independently of the movements of the peoples to whom they belong, and it is true that they pass with especial ease and freedom from more advanced to less advanced tribes where adoption merely and not replacement is necessary. The proposition that the movement in this case was one of art rather than of people, and that elements of the well-advanced culture of the islands were adopted on the mainland by comparatively rude peoples, is supported by the following considerations: If the Caribbean peoples had originally belonged in or had taken permanent possession of the Florida-Georgia region they would have practiced their full range of shaping arts, yet among the remains of the region, so far as I know, no single implement or article of sculptured stone of strictly Caribbean characters has been found. Again, the designs in use by the potters of the south are to all appearances exotic. They have no analogues in the other arts of the province or in any of the arts of the remainder of the country. There is nothing in the simple art with which they are associated to suggest a possibility of their development within that art, and they bear every evidence of having been forced into uses and applied to forms and spaces to which they have a purely arbitrary relation. This can only

be fully realized by a study of the hundreds of examples where elegant designs are applied in utter confusion as a means of texturing surfaces of pots or in filling in bands and zones so narrow that only small sections of the figures can be shown. They have no consistent relationship with the decoration of vessels and certainly no genetic relation with the art of the province so far as preserved.

Having formulated the above impressions with regard to so-called Caribbean influence in the art of the province, I proceeded to make inquiries as to other evidences of contact, and found that early explorers of the Florida coast regarded the frequent presence of the island peoples in Florida as a matter of course, and recent writers* have published many details tending to confirm the belief in frequent and familiar intercourse. Some authors mention the use of various Carib terms applied to places and districts in the Appalache country, and this fact, it seems to me, is especially worthy of note because such employment of words would strongly indicate not merely Caribbean intercourse but Carib occupation and dominance. This evidence, which may or may not be of value, is not supported by the ceramic testimony, the latter serving to indicate nothing more than an intercourse from shore to shore sufficient for the acquirement and adoption by the Floridians of certain features of decoration to the exclusion, apparently, of other features of durable art.

I have not attempted to show more than that the decorative art of the mainland was probably strongly influenced by the art of the Caribbean islands, the question of race not having been brought forward, but there are strong probabilities that the Antillean peoples concerned were of Carib stock. It may be observed that the three designs illustrated in Figs. 2, 3, and 4 belong to an island of the Bahama group, and that we cannot absolutely connect the relics—the particular wooden stools to which the ornaments belong—with the Caribs, but we find that these stools are Caribbean in style and have no analogues in the Florida region. The stone stools found scattered over the islands are identical in style with the wooden ones and have engraved

* Brinton, D. G.: Notes on the Florida Peninsula, 1859, pp. 96-98, 136.
Gatschet, A. S.: Proc. Amer. Philos. Soc., xviii, p. 465.

figures of precisely similar character. It is also worth noting that Herrera records the use of such wooden stools by the inhabitants of the Island of Cuba. When a party of Spaniards was entertained by the inhabitants of a principal village they were led to "seats made of a solid piece of wood in the shape of a beast with very short legs and the tail held up, the head before, with eyes and ears of gold."* This is, so far as form is referred to, a perfect description of the Turk's island stools.

I may add that there is hardly a conventional linear design on the whole series of carved wood and stone articles derived from the Antilles and attributed to the Caribs that cannot be closely duplicated in the ceramic decorations of the Florida-Appalache province. It thus appears that we have here not the usual analogies of art resulting from likeness of human capacities and environment, or even the ordinary blending of features and phases of art always met with in the work of contiguous inhabited provinces, but striking identities in elements of embellishment, which elements are entirely at home in the art of one province, and exotics—mere wayfarers—in the esthetic wilderness of another. They are such identities as would result from the full adoption by one people of the ripened products of the art of another.

As to the period at which the arts referred to were practiced and at which interchanges are assumed to have taken place there may be no positive evidence, but all the historic circumstances within reach and many of the art conditions observed favor the view that the period, perhaps a long one, was that closing with the occupation of America by Europeans.

The ceramic products bearing evidence of Caribbean influence in Florida belong to the latest pre-Columbian times—the Timuquan-Muskhogean period—while the earlier pottery, represented in what appears to be a middle period of shell-heap deposition, affiliates with phases of the art prevalent in the Gulf states beyond the limits of supposed Carib influence.

It may be mentioned that there are here and there in the art of the Gulf coast of Florida traces or hints of Yucatec ideas. Nothing has been found to indicate actual transfer of ceramic articles from Yucatan, much less of the planting of colonies

* Quoted by Prof. O. T. Mason, Smithsonian Report, 1876, p. 376.

practicing the art. The exotic suggestions appear in the form and decorations of earthen vessels essentially northern in their fundamental characteristics.

Taken altogether the ceramic phenomena of the Southern states seem to indicate pretty much the degree of intercourse between the nations occupying the neighboring land areas as would be expected of enterprising peoples well enough advanced in maritime matters to navigate the wide straits with considerable ease, yet decidedly attached through long occupation to definite traditional seats of habitation; the tendency being under such conditions of association for culture elements to pass by infiltration, so to speak, from the higher to the lower culture groups.

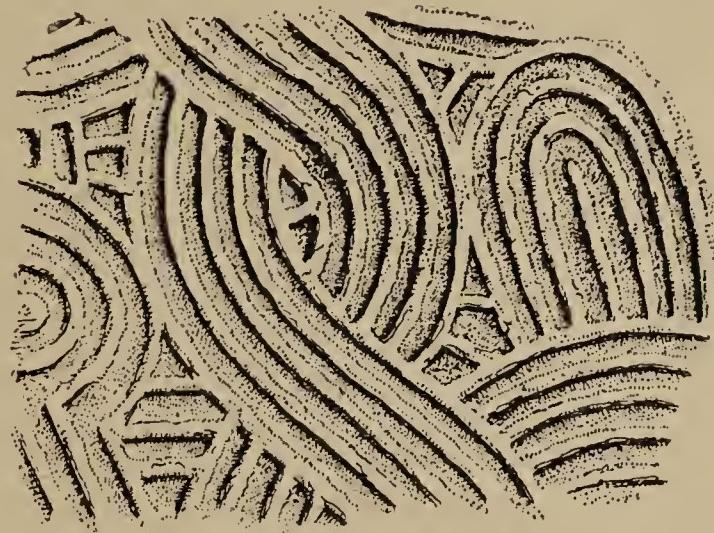


FIG. 6.—Fragment of stamp design of Caribbean type from an Appalachian vase.

